

# "What Do You Do?" ...Is A Trick Question



Turn That Question To Your Advantage  
When The Stakes Are High

# Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| When the stakes are high, we get asked this question a lot. | 3  |
| But it's a trick question.                                  | 4  |
| Turn a trick question to your advantage.                    | 7  |
| Uncover your unique value.                                  | 10 |

*"The most important factor in making a successful decision on who gets the job offer, who gets the promotion, and who gets protected from layoffs is... what kind of VALUE will you be contributing to the organization."*



**significa**group llc  
Leadership. Influence. Presence.

“The CFO asked someone what my team and I do.”

It was the late summer of 2022, and tech companies were beginning to think about contingency plans as they began to sense that growth might be slowing. My leadership coaching client felt uneasy that despite regular reports to the management team, the CFO still didn't seem to have a good handle on what he and his team did. Where did that leave them if cutbacks were necessary in the fall or next year? The work they did was essential to the company's success. Clearly, my client thought, he needed to pull together more detailed data. Or did he?

“It's a trick question!” I blurted out.

## **When the stakes are high, we get asked this question a lot.**

While my words were certainly impulsive, my FEELINGS about the question “What do you do?” weren't. In fact, those feelings had been brewing for a few years as I watched my clients in one high-stakes situation after another.

Considering new job opportunities. Gaining more credibility with senior management. Positioning themselves for a promotion. And now seeking to avoid layoffs.

These were all situations where the “What do you do?” question was coming up in one form or another for my clients. And they were all situations where the stakes were high.

Of course, my clients took the question very seriously, because that’s what high-achievers do. They listed details of their credentials and experience. And they supplied data and analyses on the results they had delivered.

Sounds like a pretty comprehensive answer to the question, right?

So why did that approach worry me? Why did a straight-forward answer to “What do you do?” feel it wasn’t enough to help my clients get the job, gain the credibility, or avoid the layoffs?

## **But it’s a trick question.**

The reason why that approach worried me is that I already knew what the world looks like from the point of view of decision-makers.

In my former roles on the management teams of global corporations, my colleagues and I had been the ones deciding on hiring, promotions and

layoffs. And in my later role as a leadership advisor for a well-known search firm, my colleagues and I were the ones assessing job candidates and helping boards and management teams decide who made the cut.

And given my past experience as a decision-maker, I knew at least two secrets about how these choices get made.

The first secret is that by the time final decisions get made, the pool of people can look an awful lot alike. Sure, each one has unique experiences and a unique personality. But each one also is generally well-qualified and is saying similar things. The easy decisions have already been made, and now it's getting a little confusing. Who makes the cut when it seems like there are only small differences among the pool of people you're looking at?

And the second secret is this. The most important factor in making a successful decision on who gets the job offer...or who gets the promotion or who gains credibility and influence...or who is protected from layoffs... is this.

What kind of VALUE will you be contributing to the organization?

You can see what the problem is now, right?

If decision-makers don't know what kind of value you can contribute, they often don't have the clarity and insight they need to make great decisions. And if YOU haven't specified what value you can give to them and the organization, you're likely to just look like everyone else...even if you aren't.

***“If you haven't specified what value you can give, you're likely to look like everyone else... even if you aren't.”***

“What do you do?” is ultimately an irrelevant question. Or at least it's irrelevant to whether the decision goes in your favor. When you answer it literally, decision-makers still have to deduce whether the activities you have done in the past mean that you can contribute meaningful value going forward.

In other words, they have to guess.

I don't like to rely on the accuracy of other people's guesses when the stakes are high. And you shouldn't either.

# Turn a trick question to your advantage.

Now, I don't mean to imply that people are intentionally trying to trick you when they ask the "What do you do?" question. It's merely an unhelpful question, both for decision-makers and yourself.

But just because it's an unhelpful QUESTION doesn't mean that you have to provide an unhelpful ANSWER. In fact, you can answer in a way that not only puts you at an advantage. It also makes things easier for decision-makers.

Step 1 is first to RECOGNIZE THE TRICK QUESTION.

The question can pop up in variety of ways. Here are a few examples:

- ✓ What do you do in your current job?
- ✓ What does your department do?
- ✓ What did you do last year?
- ✓ What have you done in past jobs?
- ✓ If you get this role, what will you do in your first 90 days?
- ✓ If we have to reduce headcount, what will your department do?

All of these variations of the question sound like they're asking for a list of ACTIVITIES. And perhaps that's even what the questioner thinks is necessary.



But the reality is that these are all questions about VALUE. The questioner is going to perk up and listen closely if you can succinctly describe what value you've contributed you've delivered in the past and what value you can deliver in the future. That's what's going to make a difference to him or her.

***“The questioner is going to perk up and listen closely if you can succinctly describe the value you can deliver.”***

Now that you've recognized that you're being asked a trick question, Step 2 is USE THE VALUE FORMULA for your successful response.

The Value Formula gives the questioner what he or she has asked for.....but not before you have a chance to express your value.

What is the Value Formula, you ask? Well, of course, I have your back on that! Here it is:

### ***The Value Formula***

***I help the company achieve X, so it can better do Y,  
and I do it in the following ways (Z).***

In the formula, X equals the outcomes to the company of the work that you do. This is your ORGANIZATIONAL value.

- ✔ Maybe it's an attractive marketing profile or successful products. Maybe it's greater efficiencies or risk reduction. Or maybe it's an optimized business strategy or motivated and energized workforce. There are many possibilities, and these are just examples.

Y in the formula equals what the company can do better as the result of the your outcomes. This is your STRATEGIC value.

- ✔ Does the outcome allow the company to be more innovative? Does the outcome allow the company to anticipate and plan for market disruptions faster? Does the outcome allow the company to attract higher talent than competitors? Again, there are many possibilities for this part of the formula.

Finally, Z is how you produce those valuable outcomes. NOW you can answer the "What do you do?" question directly...but with a twist

- ✔ Feel free to list some of the key activities you perform to deliver those outcomes. After all, that's what the questioner technically asked for.
- ✔ But if you want to be even more compelling and persuasive, add an adjective or two (or a few sentences) to your answer that gets across how you show up as you perform those activities.

- In other words, people like to know what makes you special in the workplace. What drives you and how does it feel to work with you?
- Do you help keep everyone calm and focused in stressful environments? Do you make sure all key stakeholders on a project are kept informed? Are you the person who brings energy to a group? Are you the safe pair of hands that makes sure nothing falls through the cracks?
- As with the other parts of the formula, there are many options you could go with. The important thing is that whatever you say should really capture the essence of who you are.

## Uncover your unique value.

Now that you have the Value Formula, you'll always know how to create a powerful answer to the "What do you do?" question when the stakes are high.

Decision-makers will always understand what makes you worthwhile and desirable in the workplace. And you'll stand out from the crowd in a beneficial way. The phrasing of your answer makes you look and sound like a leader, not just someone who meets the criteria for the decision that's being made.

But I do get another question about the Value Formula...and often it's asked in a sheepish way.

The question is "Do you have any tips about how I identify my value? I'm not sure I know exactly what it is."

Well, no need to be embarrassed about that all. We've all been there...including myself at one point in my corporate career.

Our lives are filled with lots of time-sensitive work and deadlines, and that's where we generally keep our focus. We're almost always using our critical thinking and analytical skills—they help us to excel in our day-to-day jobs.

But the world of critical thinking, analysis and tight deadlines is generally not the perfect mindset in which to perceive the larger picture. Understanding our true and unique value requires perspective and a little reflection.

So it's normal to struggle a little in defining what makes us unique and special. In fact, many of us believe that because we struggle to identify what that is, we actually AREN'T unique at all.

Well, that is not at all true. We're ALL superstars in a particular way, and I'm not saying that to make you feel good. It's an observation based both

on science and my decades of experience at all levels of the corporate world.

So here's a useful tip for uncovering YOUR unique value—the value you always bring to the table and that makes people remember you.

It's to ask others.

Other people already know what they value about us. So if you're having a hard time getting clarity on that for yourself, why not go straight to the source?

And in fact, often other people see us more clearly than we do ourselves, no matter how smart and insightful we are.

Here's a story that illustrates that. In my work as a leadership coach, I often collect feedback on my clients. I ask the key stakeholders in a client's life (1) what makes them particularly effective and (2) what they can target to become even more effective at.

***“Often other people see us more clearly than we do ourselves, no matter how smart and insightful we are.”***

When I summarize the feedback for my client, do you know what almost always surprises them? It's the traits that other people admire in them.

Isn't that interesting? And I'm pretty sure I understand why this is. The things that other people admire in us and see as our unique value...are usually the things that come the EASIEST to us. They're part of our DNA, and because they come naturally to us, we really don't think of them as being a superpower or otherwise very valuable.

But other people can see what makes you different. And they're a great source of insight for you as you develop your own understanding of what you bring to the table.

Now, I'm not suggesting that you ask people the question "What makes me uniquely valuable?" or "What is my super power?" Not only would that be cringe-worthy, but you usually don't get very clear answers when you put people on the spot.

Instead, it's better to ask a few low-key and focused questions that will get you data that you can then later review for yourself. Here are some options to get you started:

- ✔ What are the top 2-3 words that pop into your mind when you think about working with me?
  
- ✔ When you hear that I'm involved in a project, what are 1-2 things that you know are likely to happen?

✓ When you hear that I'm involved in a project, what are 1-2 things that you know are unlikely to happen?

It's always best to ask these questions in-person or in a call vs. in writing. And jot down everything that you hear, no matter how random it seems in the moment.

Once you've collected all your data, sit down and look at it over a cup of coffee, glass of wine, or whatever. In other words, RELAX. You want to get rid of your analytical mindset and instead tap into your reflective mindset.

Ask yourself, "What themes and patterns do I see in this data? What kind of person is it describing? What has the ring of truth, even if it isn't something that I would have said about myself?"

And if you STILL struggle to answer those questions, show your notes to a trusted friend, and ask him or her those questions. Remember, often others can see us more clearly than we can see ourselves.

Your goal is to come up with the 2-3 attributes or themes that seem the MOST true about yourself. And that will be your unique value. Any one of those attributes on its own might not be unusual. But the COMBINATION of those attributes...well, the combination is what makes you special and different.

And there you have it. You're now well on your way to helping others understand the value you can contribute when the stakes are high.

And what about my client? The one whose CFO didn't understand what he and his team did?

Well, he rolled up his sleeves and revised the presentation he was planning to make. Sure, he listed the activities that he did. But BEFORE he got to that, he made sure to connect the dots for the CFO. He used the Value Formula to show the outcomes that the team delivered to the organization. And he used the Value Formula to describe how those outcomes allowed the company to thrive...even during an economic downturn.

By the time, he got to the list of activities he and his team actually do, that list was close to irrelevant. The CFO and rest of the management already had what they really needed...a clear understanding of the important value my client and his team were delivering.

The result? No layoffs for my client and his team, and increased credibility for him and the role that he plays in the company. And should additional layoffs ever be required in the future, my client feels confident and secure. He now understands how to make future employers see his value in a compelling and persuasive way...and he's sure that he can land a great fit new job if he needs it.

So here's to you excelling as well in whatever high-stakes situation you encounter! I can't wait to see what you achieve.





Is Managing Director of Significa Group LLC and a former CEO of a well-known global company. She now coaches C-suite leaders and fast-rising high potentials who are being prepared for larger and more complex roles.

Significa also offers online courses and group coaching programs for individuals on the power skills of influence, persuasion, and presence.

# Kathy Dockry

## More Free Resources

Follow **Mastering The Power Skills** on Apple, Spotify, or wherever you source your podcasts.

Kathy shares tips and strategies that you're unlikely to hear anywhere else on the skills of influence, persuasion, and presence. It's high-impact content that you can use immediately to achieve even greater success in the workplace.

“

*Kathy's ability to read a situation and manage it skillfully...and to grow your OWN ability to do that...is amazing!*

”

*SVP, National Hospital System*

“

*Kathy's session with our team on influence and persuasion was powerful, game-changing...and the list goes on!*

”

*SVP, Global Tech Manufacturer*

**significa**group llc

Leadership. Influence. Presence.